

Arafat Still Casts Shadow Over Mideast Talks

By Steve Israel

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Tuesday's suicide bus bomb in Jerusalem and the Israeli strike yesterday that killed Hamas leader Ismail Abu Shanab may have changed the minds of Americans about the prospects of peace in Israel. But my mind was changed two weeks ago at a meeting with Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mahmoud Abbas at his Gaza Strip guest house.

As part of a congressional delegation, we drove through an Israeli checkpoint, then across a no-man's land on a serpentine trail configured with cement barricades, then through a Palestinian checkpoint and arrived at a modest two-story structure pocked with bullet holes and ringed with well-armed, tense-looking security personnel. We were escorted up dimly lit stairs into a rather ordinary conference room, where the prime minister met us politely.

We shook hands warmly. In his hands, we had been told, was the best hope for peace with Israel. He was selected to replace Yasser Arafat principally because he is not Arafat. He is moderate, and believes that the Palestinians were mistaken in using violence to pursue their goals. Sitting across the table, he seemed almost wistful when he noted that the Palestinian hudna (cease-fire) allowed "about half of Gaza to go to the beach last weekend. They don't want to return to violence."

And yet there is only one thing adorning the walls of that conference room. High above the table is a large portrait of Arafat. The symbolism is profound - Arafat overlooking Abbas, overseeing the commitments he makes. It is as if to say, "We know who's really in charge here."

Who's in charge is the crux of the problem in the Middle East. And the Bush administration's road map to peace can't succeed if it detours around the people in charge of supporting terror - whether they are the religious leaders of Iran, the past leaders of Iraq, or the regimes in Saudi Arabia and Syria. Every time Palestinians and Israelis try to cut a deal to foster stability, the deal is undercut by the promoters of terror. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict isn't fueling terrorism; state sponsors of terrorism are fueling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In only 12 days in Israel, I saw myriad examples of the limits of the Israelis' and Palestinians' control over their own fate. Israeli newspapers reported that Iran ordered, funded and helped organize the bulk of about 200 terror attacks against Israel since Palestinian groups themselves proclaimed a cease-fire in late

June. Hamas and Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for separate suicide bombings that murdered two Israelis on a single afternoon, while a mother and her children received gunshot wounds on a highway. These operations require logistics and training; 60 percent of Hamas' annual budget, between \$12 million and \$14 million, is contributed through Saudi Arabia, according to an intelligence report in the Jerusalem Post. And Syria and Lebanon have allowed the Hezbollah terrorists to double the inventory of missiles in southern Lebanon and resume the unprovoked bombardment of Israeli communities.

Why do these nations prefer roadside bombings over road maps to peace? Abbas' comment under the portrait of Arafat was telling: Peace allows people to go to the beach. What he didn't say, but what the man in the portrait understands, is that when populations feel comfortable enough to go to the beach, they may start asking uncomfortable questions about why their leaders haven't delivered jobs, housing, infrastructure, modern schools, transparent economies, free elections. And, if they cannot blame Israel and the United States for their failures, whom will they blame? Removing the West as a scapegoat dooms those regimes to the scrutiny of their own people.

So the United States should recognize some hard realities. Drawing a line in the sand against terror requires policies based on consistency rather than convenience.

First, the administration should stop criticizing Israel for building a security fence. If Arab leaders stopped sending suicide bombers onto Israeli buses, the fence wouldn't be necessary.

Also, we need to use all the tools we have to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure that is being funded and supported by hard-line Arab regimes. Instead of hoping for the best in Iran, we must organize Europe, Russia and the United Nations to use sanctions and embargoes to undermine that country's development of nuclear weapons and strengthen forces of moderation and pluralism. We should demand that Saudi Arabia crack down on terrorists.

If we are cognizant of these realities, peace and stability may yet prevail. In that Gaza guest house, Abbas said this about his efforts to negotiate peace: "We receive opposition from those who enjoyed chaos. Real stability is against their interests, but real stability is what we are trying to achieve."

The smiling Yasser Arafat in the portrait above him could have frowned.

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